

In brief

Bush appoints new surgeon general:

President Bush has selected trauma surgeon Dr Richard Carmona to be the next surgeon general of the United States. Dr Carmona, 52, is currently clinical professor of surgery, public health, and family and community medicine at the University of Arizona.

London university launches training programme for refugee doctors:

The University of London's Queen Mary College is to launch a programme this month enabling 30 refugee doctors a year to train to work in the United Kingdom, including preparation for the English language qualification required by the GMC. The course is funded by a £300 000 (\$429 000; €490 000) grant from the Mercers' Company of the City of London.

Canada fails to invest in equipment:

Canadian doctors and the public are upset by the fact that only half of the \$C1bn (£0.4bn; \$0.6bn; €0.7bn) provided in 2000 by the federal government, for the provinces to buy badly needed diagnostic equipment such as magnetic resonance image scanners, has been spent.

More bedside checks needed to prevent wrong blood transfusions:

A report from the SHOT (serious hazards of transfusion) scheme says that preventable human errors are still happening when patients are given blood transfusions. A total of 315 reports of transfusion related problems were received by SHOT during 2000-1, of which more than two thirds were caused by patients being transfused with blood components that did not match their requirements. Copies of the report can be obtained from www.shot.demon.co.uk

National Care Standards Commission launched:

The National Care Standards Commission, established to ensure high standards among all care providers, became operational last week. It will register and inspect 40 000 social care and independent healthcare services.

Claims of clone pregnancy could threaten US stem cell research

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

Leading scientists are concerned that reports of a woman being pregnant with a cloned baby could lead to a halt in stem cell research in the United States.

They fear that controversy over reports of what would be the world's first cloned human could tip the US Senate in favour of banning the cloning of embryos for stem cell research. Such a ban would seriously undermine work that offers the possibility of cures for many diseases.

"My worry is that it is going to do very severe damage to the legitimate application of cloning," said Dr Robert Lanza, head of science at Advanced Cell Technology, the American biotechnology company regarded as one of the world leaders in the science of cloning. "There is a vote coming up in the US Senate in a few weeks on cloning and at present it is pretty close. It is not good timing for this kind of claim to appear.

"Tens of millions of people will benefit from this technology. If the vote goes negative, it could effectively stop research in the United States, which has the most creative biotech sector. It would be a very great shame. Research here suggests that 3000 Americans a day die from diseases that could benefit from this technology."

Italian fertility specialist Dr Severino Antinori was reported to have claimed last week that a woman was eight weeks pregnant with a cloned baby. He refused to comment further after the announcement, which was made at a meeting in the United Arab Emirates.

When the *BMJ* contacted Dr Antinori's office in Rome and rang his mobile phone number, he would not comment. A spokesman for his collaborator Dr Panos Zavos at the Andrology Institute of America in Lexington, Kentucky, said Dr Zavos was not available for comment.

Prominent cloning scientists

are doubtful. Dr Ian Wilmut, who created Dolly, the world's first cloned sheep, in the United Kingdom in 1996, said: "I am very sceptical. I find it very difficult to take him seriously at all. He has been saying for months, bordering on years, that he has been cloning animals.

"He has made claims that seemed at the time to be very unlikely, and he has never substantiated those claims. I will take him seriously when he first puts an accurate detailed description of an animal cloning experiment into the scientific literature."

Dr Lanza said: "It is extremely unlikely he has had any success cloning a human fetus. I am not impressed. In all likelihood, one of the women in the programme got pregnant in the old fashioned way. I would be very surprised if all the couples involved abstained from sex."

The concern now is over the US Senate vote on stem cells. The Senate is expected to debate competing bills on cloning. All the bills propose outlawing cloning babies, but one goes further and forbids cloning human embryos for stem cell research—so called therapeutic cloning.

The vote is said to be too close to call. □

Strategy needed for mental health of women prisoners

Caroline White *London*

The extraordinarily high rates of mental health problems among UK women prisoners are often neglected by a criminal justice system that is geared towards men, a new report has stated.

Recent government policy initiatives to tackle mental health problems and women's issues lack an overarching cohesive strategy, said the report, *Women Who Challenge*, issued by Nacro, a charity working to prevent crime.

Two thirds of women prisoners have some form of mental disorder, and this contributes to their offending, said the report. National statistical data from 1998 show that four out of 10 women had been receiving help for mental health or emotional problems before imprisonment,

double the rate in male prisoners.

Research suggests that a third of women prisoners have attempted suicide, and four out of 10 self harm. Many women prisoners are dependent on drugs, especially on heroin; alcohol misuse and sexual and/or physical abuse are common.

Half of women prisoners are treated with psychotropic drugs,

yet only 17% had been prescribed these drugs before starting their sentence. The report calls for a standardised prescribing protocol under the care of the NHS. □

Women Who Challenge is available from Nacro Publications (tel 020 7582 6500), price £12.50 plus £1.50 post and packaging.

